



William J. "Bill" Andes was the first Conference Minister, serving from 1966 to 1980.

Emmett Owen Floyd was the second Conference Minister, serving from 1980 to 1987.



Roger Duayne Knight was the third Conference Minister, serving from 1988 to 1995.

Timothy Campbell "Tim" Downs was the longest-serving Conference Minister in SEC history, with a tenure from 1996 to 2013.





June Evlen Boutwell was the fifth (Designated) Conference Minister, serving from 2014 to 2017.



Kimberly Anne Wood is the sixth Conference Minister; she has served the Southeast Conference since 2021.

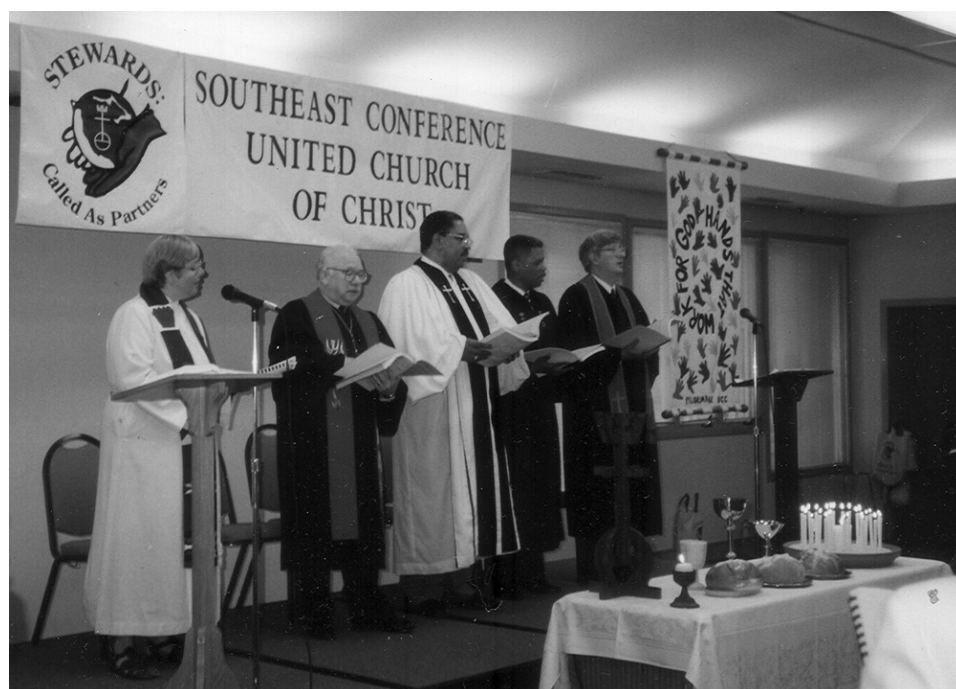


While not as successful as other denominations have been in the field, new church starts are a key responsibility of mid-level judicatories such as the Southeast Conference, and efforts to initiate and sustain them have been quite thorough over time. Here, circa 1980, Pilgrimage UCC in Marietta, Georgia meets at a temporary location, which happened to be a bowling alley, of all places. The congregation today has its own building and is a thriving church with well over 200 members. Pilgrimage was one of the few long-term successes the Conference had before the arrival of Tim Downs as Conference Minister in 1996.



The unduly large geography of the Southeast Conference, a problem since the inception of inter-church work among Congregationalists in the South in the late 19th century, inhibits frequent contacts among clergy in many cases. That means that the Conference has had to be more proactive in providing programs to allow for collegial learning and fellowship among ministers than is usually the case with other traditions. This group pictured here met in 1973.

But no matter the distances traveled, Annual Meetings are the one occasion each year where clergy and laypeople from every section of the territory, from Tougaloo, Mississippi to Charleston, South Carolina; Deer Lodge, Tennessee to Beachton, Georgia; and many points in between the vast spread of land described, come to gather to make friendships, renew old ones, and do the business of the organization. Seen here is a registration line from the 1969 meeting at Central Congregational Church in Atlanta.



Twenty-nine years later, the Conference Annual Meeting took place at a Methodist-related retreat center northeast of Atlanta. Participants in this worship service included, left to right, Annette H. Nielsen; Timothy C. Downs; Lawrence E. Calbert, Sr.; Gary L. Myers; and James L. Smalley, Jr.



For a number of years between the 1970s and the 1990s, Oak Grove Congregational Christian Church near Pine Mountain, Georgia held an annual arts and crafts, or “country,” fair to raise money for the congregation’s foundation, which gave grants to area charities and scholarships to the nearby LaGrange College. Of “Christian Connection” descent, Oak Grove Church is the sole functioning survivor of that tradition in the Conference today, with almost all of its former sister churches having departed the UCC in protest against the denomination’s liberal-learning social stances and theology.

The Alabama-Tennessee Association was founded in 1969 as a consolidation of several smaller groups separated by race and denomination previously. It was the strongest of the Conference’s lower-level bodies, contributing most heavily to Our Church’s Wider Mission historically than churches in other regions of the Conference. In 2012, it and the other associations ceded ecclesiastical functions to the Conference itself and became primarily a fellowship group. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and technological changes, the Association stopped meeting after 2019. Pictured here is the 1974 annual Association meeting held at St. John’s UCC in Cullman, Alabama.



Because of its small size, typically the Southeast Conference sends one of the smallest delegations to the UCC’s national body, the General Synod, which meets in alternating years. Nevertheless, the SEC has contributed more than its fair share of Synod and denominational leaders over several generations. Milton Hurst, Marvin Morgan, Annie Wynn Neal, and Barbara Everett are just a few examples of people who have been nurtured by the Conference’s congregations and prepared by the associations and the Conference to provide direction to nationwide priorities, goals, and initiatives of the UCC at large. In 1991, this group of visitors and delegates attended the 18th Synod in Norfolk, Virginia.





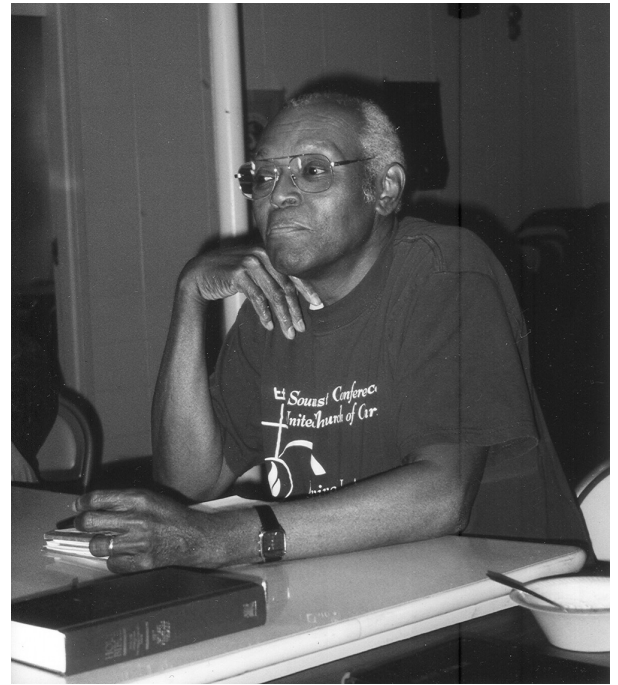
Admittedly not one of the better-performing ministries in Conference history, the spiritual and social needs of young people have not been totally forgotten in the midst of what were frequently more pressing struggles. The Conference youth, through about the early 1970s, continued the Southeast Convention's Pilgrim Fellowship tradition of annual meetings for some years, and this is a photo of the 1969 gathering at United Church of Huntsville, Alabama.



With a revolution in social mores afoot and youth being consequently more difficult to reach with traditional programming as in the past, creative leaders such as Trudi Sanford, seen at right, devised more comprehensive, relationship-driven methods in youth ministry during the 1970s and 1980s. More recent years have seen the Conference participate in retreats held by the neighboring Southern Conference.



The African-American traditions bequeathed to the SEC by the American Missionary Association are among the most precious of the SEC's gifts. Artis Johnson (left) was the first African-American ordained by a Conference association in 1973, while Milton Hurst (right) was a highly influential, spiritual, and insightful figure who was pastor of First Congregational Church in Talladega, Alabama.



One of the sadder episodes in Conference history was the failure of the once-promising Gwinnett Community UCC in Lilburn, Georgia. Started in 1978 (under the name Button Gwinnett UCC) with much enthusiasm and national backing as part of a "Sunbelt" strategy of church planting, the congregation never quite found a large audience to build up its membership, which was plagued by debt from a premature building campaign. By the time of its closure in 1994, the Conference was moving away from older models of new church work that relied heavily on suburban growth and extensive planning, toward other constituencies more amenable to the UCC's general message of welcome and inclusion, such as those of alternative sexual orientation, young urbanites, African-Americans, and ethnicities such as Koreans.



In the mid-1990s, Lala Allen (pictured in extreme front), a member of Pleasant Grove Congregational Christian UCC near LaFayette, Alabama, donated a part of her farmland for development into a retreat center and campgrounds. This group is seen breaking ground on one of the structures. Unfortunately, the project did not attract widespread support throughout the Conference and was a victim of the withdrawal of many of the supporting churches from the UCC some years later. Only the pavilion got built as a result; that structure was used for some years by the Sandy Creek UCC, a church composed of a remnant loyal members from some of the withdrawing congregations.

A more successful venture was the Theology Among the People program, conceived by the Rev. Richard "Dick" Sales (extreme right in photo) as a means to provide theological education to pastors and laypeople who cannot afford the cost or time involved in seminary training. TAP has since been revamped as the PATHWAYS program, with ordination and licensure tracks. Pictured is the first graduating class, from 2003.







The Board of Directors of the Conference sets policies and makes decisions for the organization between its Annual Meetings. Pictured here is a Board meeting from 1972.



Four decades later, in 2013, the Board was noticeably more diverse than 1972, reflective of the varied races, cultures, and theologies of the Conference. But the main tasks of the Board have remained constant over the years, despite the turbulence of the Southern religious landscape and social and technological change that puts unforeseen pressure on what many might perceive as simple decisions. The churches' and people's support of the members' work is crucial, now as then, to the SEC's continued health and growth.